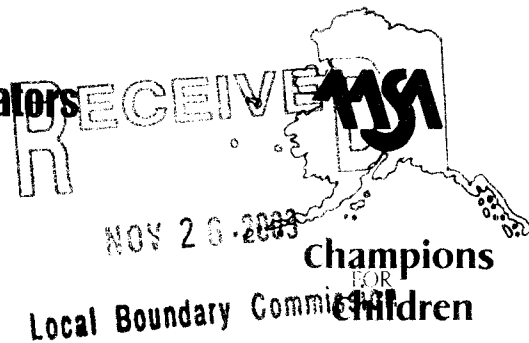


# Alaska Association of School Administrators

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

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20 November 2003

Darroll Hargraves  
Chair  
Local Boundary Commission  
550 W. 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 1770  
Anchorage, AK 99501

Roger Sampson  
Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development  
801 W. 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 200  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Mr. Hargraves and Commissioner Sampson:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the matter of school consolidation, as requested in your letter of November 10, 2003. The Alaska Association of School Administrators (AASA) is vitally interested in this topic and welcomes the chance to help frame the discussion to best meet the needs of Alaska's students.

For the record, the AASA membership passed a resolution in early October 2003 opposing mandated school district consolidation. Several reasons are cited in the resolution to include, the loss or reduction of local control over educational matters, the lack of a demonstrable connection between academic performance and school consolidation, and projected minimal cost savings. AASA membership does support continuation of the many existing cooperative efforts to share services, when such efforts result in real cost savings to the districts.

Most importantly, we believe that if school district consolidation is to occur, it must enhance student achievement. Otherwise, there is little point to creating the upheaval that will likely result. However, if districts voluntarily combine (as has occurred in the past) it is assumed they will have analyzed the benefits to each, both monetarily and academically, through shared services, shared staff, economies of scale for purchasing, and the like.

You have posed two questions. First, *"Given the considerable administrative and managerial duties associated with operating a public school district, at what point does the best interest of Alaska's children and the best interest of the general public compel school consolidation?"*

In answer, consolidation of schools is a district function, not a state function. The number of schools, and their grade levels, should be determined by the school district staff who understand the local needs and where best to target the district's resources. That being said, a reconsideration of the minimum number of students required for maintaining a school in a community should be undertaken.

Consolidation of school districts, however, arguably falls to the state. There is not a single, precise point at which school district consolidation would be compelled. For example, due to geographic location, it is unlikely that the Pribilof School District will ever be more effectively administered by another district. The school district will always require an administrator and staff on-site, even though it is small. Or, consider Skagway that is also small, yet contributes nearly 50% in local contribution to their education system. Would the state wish to risk losing that contribution by combining it with another district? On the other hand, there are some districts with more than 250 students that might benefit from merging. Bottom line? No simple solutions exist for this very complex problem.

The second question is *"If some form of school consolidation is directed by the Alaska Legislature, what options should be considered first?"* It must be underscored, once again, that AASA is opposed to mandated school district consolidation. Voluntary sharing of services and staff clearly are the options to first be considered. Furthermore, any answer to this question depends upon what the Legislature's purpose is for consolidation.

If savings to the state budget is the reason for directing consolidation, and a significant savings can be realized, then combining REAA's (because they are fully funded by the state) could be considered. In particular, there are some REAA's that were newly created some years ago, even though they had been part of an existing REAA. A second fully state-funded school district is Mt. Edgecumbe High School which is a school, not a district. It shares administrative services with the Department of Administration and it could be treated the same as other boarding schools that operate within school districts.

Next is to look at districts with fewer than 100 students, considering many factors. If a city district were to be combined with its surrounding REAA, presumably the required local contribution from that city will be lost to the state. Also, any administrative cost savings will only be realized once as other costs rise (such as travel costs to take care of administrative issues that remain, though the administrator departs).

I contacted other state executives and have learned that consolidation of school districts is no panacea for student academic performance enhancement. Proponents of consolidation believe the cost-savings, however minimal, are worth the disruption of local autonomy to run schools. Opponents of consolidation believe the price is too high for the loss of local control and involvement in their schools. In any event, no one has a good grasp of the effect on student performance, whether negative or positive.

AASA appreciates the chance to assist you in this very important task.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mary A. Francis".

Mary A. Francis, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, AASA